

Judah Stampfer, Translation of Ha-Tizmoret, *A Book That Was Lost*, The Toby Press

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I had been busy that entire year. Every day, from morning until midnight, I would sit at my table and write—at times out of habit, and at times stimulated by the pen. We sometimes dare to call this divine inspiration. I therefore became oblivious to all other affairs; and I would recall them only to postpone them. But on the eve of Rosh ha-Shanah I said to myself: A new year is approaching, and I have left many letters unattended. Let me sit down and reply to them, and enter the new year without obligations.

I proceeded on that day as on every other, save that I am regularly accustomed to arise at dawn, and that day I arose three hours earlier. For this is a night when one arises especially early for penitential prayers on the theme of “Remember the Covenant.” Before I sat down to take care of the letters, I reflected: A new year is approaching, and one ought to enter it clean, but if time does not permit me to go and bathe in the river, because of these letters, I will take a hot bath. At that moment Charni happened to be visiting us. The same old Charni who usually boasts to me that she served in my grandfather’s house long before I was born. Charni said: “Your wife is busy with holiday preparations, and you are placing extra burdens upon her. Come to our house and I will prepare you a hot bath.” I liked her suggestion; after all, I needed a haircut in honor of the Rosh ha-Shanah festival, and on the way to the barber I would stop off and bathe.

I examined the letters and weighed which of them ought to be answered first. Since they were many and the time was short, it was impossible to answer in one day all that many men had written to me in the course of an entire year, and I decided to pick out the most important ones, then to deal with those of middling importance, and afterwards with the least important. While I stood deliberating, it occurred to me that I should get rid of the trivial letters first, in order to be free for the more important ones.

Trivia tend to be frustrating. Because a matter is trivial and has no substance, it is difficult to handle. If there is a trace of substance, it lies in what the author of the letter had in mind and what answer he expected. As much as I knew that I had nothing to say in reply, my desire to answer increased, for if I left them unattended, they would trouble me. Their very existence is a burden, for I remember them and come to trivial thoughts.

I picked up a pen to write, but my mind was blank. How strange! The entire year I write effortlessly, and now that I have to write two or three inconsequential lines, my pen refuses to cooperate. I put that letter down and picked up another. This letter was no letter, but a ticket to a concert conducted by the king of musicians. I have heard that the minds of those who hear him are transformed. There actually was a man who used to go to all the concerts but got nothing out of them; he used to think that he did not appreciate music until he chanced upon a concert of this conductor. He said afterward: “Now I know that I do understand music, but that all musicians whom I have heard until now do not know what music is.” I took the concert ticket and put it in my pocket.

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The days before a holiday are brief—some of them because sundown is early and others because holiday preparations are heavy. All the more so the day before Rosh ha-Shanah, which is short in itself and is sped by preparations for the Day of Judgment. By noon I hadn’t managed to answer so much as a single letter. I put the letters aside and said to myself that what I had not managed to do before Rosh ha-Shanah I would do in the days between Rosh ha-Shanah and the Day of Atonement. It would have been good to enter a new year free of obligations, but what was I to do when trivial letters did not instruct me how they were to be answered.

I got up and went to my grandfather’s house to bathe before the holiday, for Charni had prepared me there a hot bath. But when I got to the house, I found the door locked. I walked around and around the house, and each time I reached the door, I stopped and knocked. A neighbor peeked out from behind her curtains and said: “Are you looking for Charni? Charni went to the market to buy fruit for the holiday benediction.” I continued walking around the house until Charni arrived.

By rights the old lady should have apologized for making me wait and robbing me of my time. But not only didn’t she excuse herself, she stood and chattered. If I remember correctly, she told about finding a pomegranate which was partly squashed, yet its seeds had not separated.

Suddenly three sounds were heard from the tower of the Council house. I looked at my watch and saw that it was already three o'clock. My watch is always in dispute with the tower of the Council house, and today it made peace with it. And it seemed that the Heavens were agreeing with them. Had I tarried so long on the way, and been detained walking around the house? In any case, three hours had passed and scarcely two and a half remained before the New Year's festival began. And this old woman was standing and chattering about a pomegranate that was squashed and about its seeds that had not separated.

I interrupted her and asked: "Have you prepared the bath for me, and is the water heated?" Charni set down her basket and exclaimed: "G-d in Heaven, I had intended to prepare a bath for you!" I said: "And you haven't done it?" She replied: "Not yet, but I will do it right away." I urged: "Hurry, Charni, hurry. The day doesn't stand still." She picked between her teeth with her finger and said: "You don't have to rush me. I know that time doesn't stand still, and neither will I. Look, I am already on my way in to make the fire and warm up some water. You practically have your hot bath." I took a walk in front of the house while waiting for the water to heat. The old judge passed by me. I remembered a question that I had meant to ask him, but I was afraid to get involved with him and so not manage to cleanse myself for the holiday; for this judge, once you turn to him, will not let you go. I postponed my question for another time, and did not turn to him. In order to occupy myself, I took out the ticket and noticed that the concert was for the eve of Rosh ha-Shanah. Isn't it strange that I who am not a concert-goer, should be invited to a concert on the eve of Rosh ha-Shanah! I put the ticket back in my pocket, and resumed pacing in front of the house.

Ora, my little relative, came by, whose voice was as sweet as the sound of the violin, and who looked like a violin which the musician had leaned against an unstable wall, and the wall collapsed upon it. I looked closely at her and saw that she was depressed. I asked her: "What have you been doing, Ora? You look like a little fawn that went to the fountain and found no water." Ora said: "I'm leaving here." I asked: "Why are you leaving? What's your reason? You have always wanted to see this magnificent conductor, and now that he has come to conduct our orchestra, you are leaving." Ora burst into tears and said: "Uncle, I don't have a ticket." I laughed good-heartedly and said to her: "Let me wipe away your tears." I looked at her affectionately, and thought how lucky I was to be able to gratify this dear child, who found music more delightful than all the delights in the world, and was most enthralled with the famous conductor who was this evening conducting the great chorus. I put my hand in my pocket to take out the ticket and give it to Ora. And again I smiled good-heartedly, like one who has the power to do good. But Ora, who did not know my generous intentions, threw herself about my neck and kissed me goodbye. I became distracted, forgot what I was about, and didn't give Ora the ticket. And while I was standing there, bewildered, Charni came and called me.

The oven was flaming, the bath clean and clear, and the bath water leaped and rose to meet me. But I hadn't the strength to bathe. Even my time was not with me. I said to my brother: You bathe, for I am a weak person, and if I bathe in hot water, I have to rest afterwards, and there isn't enough time. I left the bath and went home. In order to be more comfortable, I removed my hat from my head and carried it in my hand. A passing wind mussed my hair. Where were my brains? For in the hour that I stood and waited for the bath, I could have gone to the barber's. I lifted my eyes and looked up at the sky. The sun was already about to set. I went home with a heavy heart. My daughter came out to meet me, dressed in her holiday best. She pointed her finger into space and said: "Light." I thought to myself: What is she saying? The sun has already set, and hasn't left a trace of light behind. Or perhaps she meant the candle that was kindled in honor of the festival. I looked at the candles and realized that the festival had already begun, and I had better run to the House of Prayer. My daughter stared at my old clothes and put her little hands on her new dress to cover it, so as not to shame her father in his old garments. And her eyes were on the verge of tears, both for herself who wore a new dress when her father was dressed in old clothes, and for her father who wore old clothes at a time when the New Year had arrived.

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After dinner I went outside. The heavens were black, but many stars glittered in them and lit up their darkness. Not a man was outdoors, and all the houses were sunk in sleep. And I too started to doze off. But this sleep was not really sleep, for I could feel that my feet were walking. And I kept walking and walking like this until I arrived at a certain place and heard the sound of music, and I knew I had reached the concert hall. I took out my ticket and entered.

The hall was full. Men and women violinists, men and women drummers, trumpeters, and players of a variety of instruments all stood, dressed in black, and played incessantly. The great conductor was not to be seen in the hall, but

the musicians played as if someone were standing over them and waving his baton. And all the men and women musicians were my friends and acquaintances, whom I knew from all the places I had ever lived. How did it happen that all my acquaintances came together in one place and in one chorus? I came upon a place, sat down, and concentrated. Each man and woman was playing for himself. However, all the melodies joined to form a single song. And every man and woman was bound to his instrument, and the instruments were fastened to the floor, and each one thought that he alone was bound, and was ashamed to ask his neighbor to release him. Or perhaps the players knew that they were fastened to their instruments, and their instruments fastened to the floor, but thought that it was by their free choice that they and their instruments were so bound, and it was by their free choice that they played. One thing was clear, that though their eyes were on their instruments, their eyes did not see what their hands were doing, for all alike were blind. And I fear that perhaps even their ears did not hear what they were playing, and that from much playing they had grown deaf.

I slid out of my seat and crept toward the door. The door was open, and a man whom I had not noticed upon entering was standing at the entrance. He was like all other doorkeepers; but there was about him something like the air of that same old judge, who, once you have turned to him, does not let you go.

I said to him: "I would like to leave." He plucked the word out of my mouth and replied in my voice: "To leave? What for?" I said to him: "I have prepared myself a bath, and am in a hurry lest it grow cold." He replied in a voice that would have terrified even a man stronger than I, and said to me: "It's flaming. It's flaming. Your brother has already been scalded by it." I replied, apologetically: "I was occupied with correspondence, and didn't have time to take my bath." He asked: "With what letters were you occupied?" I took out a letter and showed him. He bent over me and said: "But I wrote that letter." I replied: "I intended to answer you." He looked at me and asked: "What did you intend to answer?" My words hid because of his voice, and my eyes closed, and I began to grope with my hands. Suddenly I found myself standing before my house.

My daughter came out and said: "Let me bring you a candle." I answered her: "Do you really think the candle will light my darkness?" By the time she had gone to bring it, the fire escaped from the furnace and blazed around about. And some woman stood before the furnace heaping wood on the fire. Because of the fire and the smoke, I could not look on. And I didn't see if it was old Charni who stood before the furnace, or if it was my young relative Ora who heaped up the fire.

A terror descended upon me, and I stood as if fixed to the earth. My spirit grew despondent within me that, at the time when all who sleep were sleeping, I should be so awake. In truth, not I alone was awake, but also the stars in heaven were awake with me. And by the light of the stars of heaven I saw what I saw. And because my spirit was lowly, my words hid in my mouth.

1. Robert Alter, *The Genius of S. Y. Agnon*, Commentary (1961)

Agnon is generally very coy about the sources and intentions of his writings and is said to have denied having any knowledge of Kafka, though this seems highly improbable in a man who has been an avid lifelong reader of German literature... *The Book of Deeds*, in the manner of Kafka, introduces its readers to a dreamlike world where the ordinary laws of time and place, of logical sequence and causality, seem to be suspended...

2. Rabbi Yaakov Moelin (Maharil), *Hilchot Yamim Nora'im* 5

ומה שמשכימין לסליחות קודם עמוד השחר, משום דאמרי' פ"ק דע"ז אשר הקב"ה שט בי"ח עולמות בלילה ובשלוש שעות אחרונות בבוקר שט בעולם הזה

The practice of rising early for Selichot, before first light, is due to the Talmud's statement (*Avodah Zarah* 3b) that G-d travels in eighteen [thousand] worlds at night, and in the last three hours, in the morning, He travels in this world.

3. S. Y. Agnon, *Yidische Verk*, published in translation in Ber Kotlerman, *Jewish Social Studies* 18:1

Music is the fourth good gift the Holy One, blessed be He, bequeathed to man's soul. This is where words are no longer able to express the inner feelings, the feelings inside the soul, for, in the end, the word is the cancellation of the feeling... When sculpture is incapable and color is powerless, then begins the reign of song, the powerful action of poetry. In the language of Kabbalists this is called *le'eilah ule'eila*. Music gives expression to all the inner feelings...

4. Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Schapira, Bnei Machshavah Tovah 18

ניגון הוא רק מין גילוי הנפש והרגשותיה...

A tune is only a sort of revelation of the soul and its feelings...

5. Talmud, Berachot 18b

מעשה בחסיד אחד שנתן דינר לעני בערב ראש השנה בשני בצורת והקניטתו אשתו והלך ולך בבית הקברות ושמע שתי רוחות שמספרות זו לזו...

A pious person gave a *dinar* to a pauper on the eve of Rosh HaShanah in a time of famine, and his wife quarreled with him. He went and slept in a cemetery, where he heard two spirits speaking to each other...

6. Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan (20th century Poland), Ahavat Chesed 11

ויש אנשים שסבת מניעתם ממצות גמילות חסדים, איננו מפני שחס על ממון שלו [כחמשים רובלי כסף או מאה, כל אחד לפי ערכו], שיהיו בטלות ולא יעשו רוח, רק שהוא עצל בדבר לטרה ולהלוות ולחזר ולתבוע עד שיבוא לידי פרעון. ובאמת כשנתבונן בזה, היא הסבה הגדולה שבכל הסבות המונע את האדם מעבודת ד' יתברך, ועל ידה נשאר האדם ערום מתורה ומצות ומתשובה. כי מטבע העצל לדחות כל דבר ודבר למחר וליומא אחרא.

ונראה לי שזהו כונת המדרש רבה (בראשית רבה כא:ו), "אין 'ועתה' אלא תשובה, שנאמר (דברים י:ב) "ועתה ישראל מה ד' אלקיך שואל מעמך וגו'". ולכאורה היכן רמוז תשובה בתבת "ועתה"? ובתבת "ליראה את ד'" נוכל לומר שרמוז תשובה, אבל לא בתבת "ועתה"! ונוכל לומר דהכונה הוא זהו מה שכתבנו, דעיקר כח היצר, שהוא מטעה להאדם לאמר: היום אין לך פנאי ללמד ולעסוק במצות ולהתבונן בנפשך איך לקיים את התורה, למחר וליומא אחרא תעשה כל זה, שאז תהיה פנוי מטרדותיך. וכן כשיבוא מחר מדחה אותו על מחר, וכן הולך כל ימיו ברעיון זה.

Some people are caused to refrain from the mitzvah of providing kindness not because they care for their money [fifty or one hundred silver rubles, each according to his level] which will be unoccupied and will not earn profit. Rather, it is because they are lazy about having to strain and lend and then come around to claim the debt, until they are paid.

In truth, when we contemplate this, this is the greatest of all causes keeping a person from serving G-d, and through this a person remains bereft of Torah and mitzvot and repentance. For the nature of the lazy person is that he pushes off everything to tomorrow and the next day.

It appears to me that this is the meaning of Midrash Rabbah's statement (Bereishit Rabbah 21:6), "'And now' refers only to repentance, as Devarim 10:12 says, 'And now, Israel, what does HaShem your G-d ask of you [other than to revere HaShem your G-d, to walk in His ways, etc.]?'"

Where is repentance hinted in 'And now'? In the words 'to revere HaShem your G-d' we can see a hint to repentance, but not in 'And now'!

We could suggest that the intent is as we have written. The essential power of one's *yetzer* is to mislead a person, saying, "Today you have no time to learn and to be involved in mitzvot and to spiritually contemplate how to fulfill the Torah. Tomorrow and the next day you will do all of this, for then you will be free of your distractions." And so when the next day comes it pushes him off to the following day, and so it goes for all of his days, with this same idea.